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Some time ago, a pastor friend of mine was lamenting the burden of weekly preaching. His agony was largely reduced to the pointed observation that it is hard "to come up with something new each week." This comment underscores what has become *the* task of our time: to verify worth by demonstrating novelty. Novelty has become, for better or worse, canonical. In this article I will explore this arrival of canonical novelty and suggest a faithful reappropriation of the category of novelty under the discipline of word and sacrament. In the latter task, I first consider novelty christologically before attending to our eschatologically conditioned experience of authentic novelty. In so doing, I pose some possible implications of a notion of novelty transformed by the confession that Christ alone makes all things new.

DISCLOSING NOVELTY

The degree to which we are conditioned to think of novelty as canonical might be evidenced in our surprise that others consider matters otherwise. Students of theology first encounter these strange voices when reading ancient texts and are often baffled by patristic proof of credibility by rejection of suggestions of novelty.[1] This suspicion of novelty is also evidenced in the thought of the Reform-

[1]See, for example, Polycarp, "Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians," in *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2nd ed., ed. and rev. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) 215; St. Irenaeus, *St. Irenaeus of Lyons against the Heresies*, vol. 1, bk. 1 (New York: Paulist, 1992) 72; St. Athanasius, "Four Discourses of St. Athanasius against the Arians," in *Select Treatises in Controversy with the Arians* (London: Longmans, Green, 1900) 310–312. Of course, this suspicion of doctrinal novelty does not preclude the confession that Christ himself establishes something radically new. See St.

Authentic novelty comes in the seemingly mundane practice of word and sacrament, where it is given through Christ, who makes all things new. Much of the innovation that rustles about is mere fad.

ers.[2] It is good for us to consider both the source of our affront at what we take to be a counterintuitive suspicion of novelty and the possibility of apprehending novelty "anew." This is especially the case when we wonder whether these protestations of novelty by the Reformers are a bit *too* earnest. Might we perhaps discover in the thought of the Reformers a trajectory of thought that allows an affirmation of the novel, while attending to the need to stand in continuity with the main themes of Scripture and the most ancient tradition? Regardless of our final assessment of the place of novelty in a contemporary theology, it remains startling for us that both ancients and Reformers reject the very thing we invoke in order to establish repute. While we are very eager, in praising the Reformers, to call their thought novel, such praise is nearly damnable to them. Our surprise at this suggests a need to think through our discontent with the premodern discontent with novelty and to consider how the category of novelty might be reclaimed.

"Ours is variously called a modern or postmodern era. I would say we live in both eras simultaneously, picking and choosing various emphases as the occasion fits."

In order to provide some sort of description of the place of novelty in our collective common sense, we need to consider the genesis of modern thought. Although describing an era is dangerous business when one is in the midst of it, still the task beckons. Ours is variously called a modern or postmodern era. A description of the former often includes our bewitchment by the notion of progress, the rise of the scientific paradigm, the obsessive turn to the subject, self-involving historical description, and an unassailable confidence in reason formally construed. A description of the latter generally includes attention to the decentered self, a fascination with alterity, a critique of the credibility of a metanarrative, a wholesale acceptance of pluralism and the category of incommensurability as its correlate. I would say we live in both eras simultaneously, picking and choosing various em-

Ignatius of Antioch, *Apostolic Fathers*, 157. We also see in Tertullian that a suspicion of new doctrine does not gainsay the possibility of a new discipline. Cf. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971) 100. However, Tertullian insisted that his teaching was in continuity with the earliest of the Christian tradition. Cf. Tertullian, "Against Praxeas," *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 3 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995) 598, 603. See also St. Vincent of Lerins in *Commonitory*, chap. 2: "[A]ll possible care must be taken that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all." This citation can be found at the following: http://www.voskrese.info/spl/lerins2.html (accessed 21 February 2006). Thanks to Rob Fennel for alerting me to this quotation and for helpful comments regarding this paper.

[2]In *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), see the "Preface," *Augsburg Confession* 20.12; *Apology* 2.15; 7/8.7; *Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration*, Introduction 2.5; 8.61. It should be noted that a certain ambiguity attends the adjective "new" in the *Book of Concord*. While steadfastly asserting that theirs is not a new teaching, the confessors use the adjective regularly in talking about the life in Christ as new. Yet they also call the Anabaptists "new spirits" in a disparaging use of the term (e.g., *Large Catechism* 4 [Baptism]. 28). The theme of novelty is seemingly allowed within a certain province.

phases as the occasion fits without much worry about chaotic dissonance. However, one thing remains clear in the muddle of this post/modern world: novelty trumps. Indeed, novelty serves as a kind of umbilical cord connecting the modern and postmodern world. For all of this, however, there is a distinct character to novelty as understood in modern and postmodern paradigms, which I will now examine.

Charles Taylor has noted that novelty becomes the mark of authenticity in the Enlightenment.[3] Early Enlightenment dismantling of predominant religious metaphors as superstitious and dogmatic (in the worst sense of the word) unbarred the gates and enabled the arrival of the novel as a form of evolutionary advance. This worldview reached culmination in the Hegelian system, wherein meaning is located in the progressive realization of *Geist* in the realm of history. Progress marks novelty in this worldview and presumes continuity. The new builds upon its predecessor by evolution. It should be noted that this is a very pervasive theme, and despite the battered state of the marks of modernity, a quick glance at the self-help section of your corner bookstore will confirm that the "new" me is an "improved" me. Moderns intractably define the new as improved.

In a seminal essay, Jean-François Lyotard provides a stellar description of some of the contours of postmodern thought. He underscores the importance of the scientific paradigm in the development of thought *per se*, noting that science always advances by the novel.[4] Significantly, however, Lyotard identifies the path of the novel as paralogy rather than homology.[5] At the heart of the new as understood in the postmodern paradigm is disjuncture. The impossibility of a metanarrative is a correlate of this insofar as there is no master narrative that poses the possible resolution of the disjuncture between the old and new. Thinking itself demands that one adopt the hermeneutic of suspicion that alone makes possible a paradigm shift.[6] One might concur that postmodernism has a "fated estimation of progress."[7]

The question of the relationship between the modern and postmodern is vexing and suggests the need to explore further the manner in which "both continuity and inventiveness are essential functions of identity."[8] In their weaker moments, both modernity and postmodernity display the prejudice that "only the absolutely singular and original can be modes of authenticity."[9] However, at their best, each provides a singular emphasis on two correlate notions: continuity and discontinuity.

[3]Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, Ontario: Anansi, 1991) 29.

[4]Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, foreword by Fredric Jameson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979) 26.

[5]The former refers to the scientific observation that knowledge advances by disjuncture rather than by a seamless advance, or development, of knowing—as implied by the latter.

[6]Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 54. In Lyotard's estimation, the questioning of rules is immanent to science.

[7]Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997) 7. Terry Eagleton suggests that the postmodern suspicion of the metanarrative is a metanarrative of the grandest sort. See Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996) 34.

[8]George P. Schner, *Essays Catholic and Critical*, ed. Philip G. Ziegler and Mark Husbands (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003) 6.

[9]John Webster, "Introduction: Philosophy and the Practices of Christianity," in ibid., xii.

Insofar as continuity and discontinuity sketch out the architecture of that which is truly novel, it is given to us to explore those resources that relate them. A Lutheran theologian sees these resources in baptism and eucharist. In the visible word the eternal embraces the temporal and provides us with a glimpse of authentic novelty.

AUTHENTIC NOVELTY

A Christian notion of novelty attends to the scandalous claim that authentic novelty is *sui generis* (a kind unto itself). The scandal is found in our identification of Christ as the One in whom continuity and discontinuity exist in a perichoresis that is jarring in its harmony.[10] Allusions to a "second Adam," a "new covenant," and a "perfect High Priest" shock precisely insofar as what is thoroughly and inexplicably new about Christ is that he alone enables us to see that which he is not. The old is only truly seen with the arrival of the new. Yet more is asserted in this: the legitimacy of the old is established, rather than obliterated, by the arrival of the new, and the old thereby is transformed so as to come to be what it is. In other words, in Christ I finally see who I am and who I am to be. But Christ doesn't only orchestrate my arrival, he occasions the existence of everything, including the category of novelty itself. In a Lutheran theology, it is given to us to think about this arrival of novelty sacramentally. Novelty occurs at the intersection of baptism and eucharist, which means beginning with the end and ending with the beginning. Novelty occurs in Christ, the sacramental agent, who is apprehended in faith, the first instance of knowing.[11]

> ***"Christ doesn't only orchestrate my arrival, he occasions the existence of everything, including the category of novelty itself"***

Baptism and eucharist each bear both discontinuity and continuity, yet each has a particular emphasis. In baptism discontinuity comes to the fore. Baptism is the occasion of our inclusion in the new humanity. It is the sacrament of death and resurrection, and as such, its first moment is one of fracture. Baptism announces the problem of death. In so doing, it presses us to confess that only the Triune God, in whom we are baptized, makes it possible for the one who goes to the font to be the same person who comes out, precisely by being altogether new. Baptism into the name of the Triune God is the condition for the possibility of thinking death.[12] Death, so thought, is the most radical form of rupture. Yet it is not enough to assert that baptism is rupture alone. The metaphor of a return to Eden is part and parcel of Luther's treatment of baptism. But Luther simultaneously circumscribes and

[10]See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Fundamental Ontology in Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 102–103, for further comments on being in Christ in the church as the place where discontinuity and continuity are held together, where one is simultaneously in Adam and in Christ.

[11]Ibid., 128.

[12]See Robert W. Jenson, *On Thinking the Human: Resolutions of Difficult Notions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 13.

stretches this metaphor. He points out that baptism is "not yet" a full return to Eden.[13] Baptism is conditioned eschatalogically. Yet he also claims that baptism accomplishes a return to Eden plus more.[14] In baptism, alien righteousness replaces the original justice lost in Eden. This alien righteousness, this being in Christ, *extra nos*, accomplishes that accorded original justice and more. This latter statement is decisive. Being in Christ is in continuity with being in Adam, yet there is a discontinuity invoked by the suggestion of "more." The metaphor of an archaic Eden as the destination of baptism now discloses the possibility of more—an end or *telos*. This "more" points us to Holy Communion.

Communion is, in the first instance, the sacrament of continuity. The metaphor of seamlessness is suggested by the notion that the same host offers the same meal now, in this church, that is hosted and celebrated in the eschaton.[15] This continuous communion extends in multiple directions. I commune with both my spatial and temporal neighbors by communion in Christ. Past and future are resolved in Christ's real presence, which as the eternal moment makes time and place sacred and thereby makes both whole. But communion is not continuity alone. Christ announces that this cup is the *new* covenant in his blood. Images of rupture are not altogether missing where and when bread is fractured. Yet this division of the bread and distribution of the cup is the division of diversity rather than divorce. The whole is distributed so that we go in peace, and return yet again. The meal is an *exitus* (departure) and *reditus* (return). We eat in order to go and to bring others back to the same table, to the same meal. The oscillation is a resolution of alienation. Here, diversity exists for the sake of community. Of course, all of this is possible because Christ is the host, who is identified as the one under whose feet the Father has put all things (Eph 1:22). This latter is an eschatological statement. The one who reigns from the *eschaton* rules presently through word and sacrament and so compels us to think sacramentally about novelty.

Because the sacraments point to Christ as the agent of salvation, they discipline us in the realization that authentic novelty only occurs by revelation, which is a function of the grace of the word of God. In this sense, the sacraments point us to the same word of God in Holy Scripture, who is present in absence, saves by damning, and creates life by killing.[16] The sacraments school us in attentiveness to Holy Scripture and so shape us that we are able to hear the living word in the gift of proclamation that is grounded in Holy Scripture. Sacraments orient our senses to receptivity, the *sine qua non* (indispensable condition) of hearing proper. What we hear in the proclamation emerging from Scripture is not information, but the self-presentation of the Triune God.[17] Proclamation is encounter insofar as it occurs by

[13]See Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), in *Luther's Works*, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1957–1986) 31:360 (hereafter *LW*).

[14]Ibid., 297–299, for what follows.

[15]See especially the Lukan account of the institution of the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:14–23).

[16]Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, in *LW* 33:62–63.

[17]John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 14, 15.

concession to the sacramentally derived posture of expectation. Word and sacrament meet in the recognition that *Christ* makes all things new. This realization is especially concretized in our liturgical life. Authentic novelty is the purview of Christ, who authenticates us by making us new through word and sacrament.

> ***"Novelty is not at our disposal. It cannot be understood as a function of our imagination."***

NOVELTY *REFORMATA SEMPER REFORMANDA*

Novelty construed sacramentally is, quite simply, the incursion of the eternal in the temporal and spatial.[18] Christianly understood, this is *authentic* novelty and so *sui generis*. This is not to be confused with *derived* novelty, which is the arrival of the future as the present.[19] This is the sort of novelty celebrated, for example, in the unveiling of a work of art. The distinction between derived and authentic novelty reflects the confession that temporality exists by grace of eternity. A Christian experience of authentic novelty is located at the intersection of time and eternity. The incursion of eternity in time touches us, yet ours is always a fractured reception of this authentic novelty. However, even this fractured reception is different in kind from derived novelty, which surely must be celebrated in its own right. Ours is an eschatological reception of authentic novelty, which is always already and not yet authentically novel. Novelty is not at our disposal. It cannot be understood as a function of our imagination, as it were.[20] God in Christ alone makes all things new (2 Cor 5:16–21). Insofar as Christ is the agent of novelty, novelty as experienced in the church is ordered to Christ. Those who have been washed and fed by Christ are able to see in a new way. Yet this new seeing is only possible by the illumination that is the light of Christ and presently occurs in a mirror, dimly, and so is ever in need of reformation (1 Cor 13:12). We see by grace through faith and so we can only think novelty by thinking through grace, which alone enables us to think, act, and feel anew. Grace qualifies novelty and invites us to pause and ponder the contemporary preoccupation with novelty in our culture and in our church.

We modern and postmodern pastors worry much about novelty and its correlate, relevance. We worry about boring youth. We are anxious about alienating seniors. We wonder if our sermons are too long, too short. We get nervous when

[18]See George P. Grant, *Time as History*, ed. William Christian (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), who notes that moderns divorce time from eternity in thinking it solely under the category of history. Thanks to Pam McCarroll for alerting me to this reference and other insightful comments on this essay.

[19]Inauthentic novelty, by contrast, is the attempt to orchestrate the arrival of the eternal or the future and so to be thoroughly faddish.

[20]In speaking of the arrival of the genre of the "novel" in early modern literature, Louis K. Dupré comments that "when meaning is no longer given with existence, existence itself becomes a quest for meaning. The novel symbolizes this quest." Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) 101. Charles Taylor also identifies the arrival of "the creative imagination as a power of epiphany and transfiguration" as a moral source in moderns. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) 454–455.

too many weeks go by without a pat on the back. We attend to many things, but too easily fail to attend to the one thing necessary: awe at the realization that Christ is risen. We do not and cannot make Christ present. Word and sacrament do not invoke Christ's presence, they testify to it. Authentic novelty occurs in word and sacrament by divine decree and graciously divests us of the self-imposed duty of orchestrating kairotic moments and sacralizing of space. It is given to us to point to the One who makes all things new. Moreover, our confession that we walk by faith rather than sight ought to serve notice that authentic novelty may very well occur without our even knowing it. We know by grace, and that means we know in accord with the will of God, who is the Spirit of God blowing in absolute freedom. Where, then, does this position the church in a culture obsessed with novelty? I will restrict my observations to two.

First, it is scandalous to suggest that the seemingly mundane praxis of weekly Eucharist and baptismally preaching from the text are, in fact, moments in which to anticipate authentic novelty. It is especially scandalous to claim that much of the innovation that rustles about us is mere fad. But this is exactly the logic of the confession that the risen Christ is present in word and sacrament. Pastors and congregations that live by this confession are not indifferent to the culture about them, nor uninterested in aesthetic trends and scientific developments. They celebrate the best of derived novelty. But this derived novelty is celebrated for what it is: a human gift given for *Gottesdienst* (divine service). Word and sacrament are properly celebrated when such things as innovation and inculturation are understood as something other than authentic novelty, and are authenticated by the same.

Second, the surprise of the authentically new frees us from our obsession with being other than we are, which is the most subtle form of idolatry. Authentic novelty comes to us so that we can come to be ourselves. But how does this occur? This occurs by the call of Christ to "come to me" (Matt 11:28). We come to ourselves by coming to Christ, whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light. Inauthentic novelty is striving to live *coram Deo*[21]: in a vain posture of self-projection under the demonic canon that presumes that the future is ours for manipulation. This orchestration forever falls prey to those interested in securing the *status quo* by constantly dressing it up in different guises. Authentic novelty alone provides us with a vision of a just society and world loved by the God who makes us worthy of loving it too. It alone reverses our supposition that we have enabled the kerygma, rather than the reverse, and thereby astounds us and grants us from time to time the gift of silence: something truly novel in our day and age. ⊕

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[21]M. Daphne Hampson, *Christian Contradictions: The Structures of Lutheran and Catholic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 25: "On the one hand when the human is placed *coram deo* (before God), faced with God's goodness he must necessarily judge himself a sinner." The justified person, as Hampson nicely sketches out, lives extrinsically and so finds her life hidden in God with Christ (ibid., 15).